

MULTI-LEVEL GAPS IN HR PRACTICES: A STUDY OF INTENDED, ACTUAL AND EXPERIENCED HR PRACTICES IN A MULTI-UNIT INDIAN RETAIL CHAIN

Abstract

Recent research in strategic human resource management (SHRM) has established the existence of HR practices at multiple levels- design level (intended HR practices), implementation level (actual HR practices) and employee experience level (experienced HR practices). However, the consequent multi-level gaps in HR practices have not caught the attention of HR scholars, despite an increase in multi-level research in SHRM. This is mainly because the multi-level research has excessively focused on the mediating role of employees' perceptions of HR practices and its influence on employee outcomes, which then have the potential to impact various organizational performance indicators. Thus existing studies do not address the questions of **how** and **why** the 'intended' HR practices change when these get implemented by HR and line managers, and when these get experienced by employees for whom these are designed. Using HR practices as the unit of analysis, this study makes an attempt to explore, understand and explain emergence of multi-level gaps in HR practices. It uses a qualitative case study research design with multiple embedded sub-cases and situates the study in a multi-unit hypermarket chain in India.

To begin with, the multi-level gaps were labelled as -'intended-actual' (IA) gap, 'actual-experienced' (AE) gap and 'intended-experienced' (IE) gap. This study focused on four facets of these gaps in HR practices. First, it measured the extent of gaps and commented on the nature (content, process and intent) of multi-level gaps. The findings validated the existence of multi-level gaps in HR practices and indicated that employee experience of HR practices was mainly shaped by the way HR practices were interpreted, adapted and delivered by implementers as active agents who made changes in the content, process and intent of HR

practices. Second, contrary to the existing trend in multi-level research to aggregate HR practices into a system level construct, this study mapped the gaps in individual HR practices. The findings indicated significant variations in multi-level gaps across HR practices. This has considerable implications on addressing the gaps as organizations intend to achieve higher congruency between intended, implemented and experienced HR practices.

Third, this study focused on the processes through which the multi-level gaps emerge. The findings spanned the link from design of HR practices to experience of HR practices and indicated five processes – omission, commission, initiation, non-realization and non-experience. Interplay of different sets of actors, their actions and aspirations influenced the emergence of multi-level gaps in HR practices. Fourth and final, this study attempted to identify the potential variables that shape the emergence of multi-level gaps. The inductively derived data structure highlighted various enablers and disablers that existed at multiple levels within the organization. Based on the findings grounded in reality of HR practices that existed at multiple levels within the hypermarket chain an emergent inductive process model of multi-level gaps in HR practices was derived, which is one of the main contributions of this study. Both theoretically and empirically, this study contributes to multi-level research agenda of SHRM and also gives the practitioners a guidebook on addressing different dimensions of multi-level gaps in HR practices.